

ICOA1703: BUDDHIST MONASTIC CENTERS OF EASTERN INDIA AND SOUTHEAST ASIA: REVISITING THEIR CROSS-CULTURAL LINKAGES

Subtheme 02: The Role of Cultural Heritage in Building Peace and Reconciliation

Session 3: Recreating Ideas of Memory

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Abstract: The paper would aim to look at the historical, conceptual and monastic development of the Buddhist monasteries (*mahāvihāras*), built under the aegis of the Pala and Bhaumakara rulers (8th-12th century CE) of the Eastern India, while outlining the cultural, artistic and architectural interrelationships which these religious edifices shared with the contemporaneous Buddhist buildings of Southeast Asia. These edifying buildings stood the test of time as the cultural landmarks reminiscent of the religious, pedagogic and artistic endeavours and served an archetypal model for the Southeast Asian traditions. While serving as institutional strongholds, these monastic universities upheld the idea of faith, peace and harmony. Grounded on the ideals of Vajrayana Buddhism, they ministered the notion of all-inclusiveness, gradually eliminating the patriarchy and misogyny as seen in their radical approach. They also efficaciously manifested the notion of geographical diffusionism by encouraging the mobility of pilgrims and scholars, not only spreading the religion but creating a closed cultural network between far-flung kingdoms.

In addition, the grandiose scale of the monastic complexes bespeaks the role of the patrons, state craft and the efflorescence and cosmological symbolism of Vajrayana Buddhism during this period. By examining the socio-political and religious milieu as referred in the epigraphic, textual and artistic sources, the paper would attempt to re-examine the role of such establishments in Eastern India in reinforcing cross-cultural connections with the Southeast Asian traditions. Traces of cultural linkages and influences are seen in the Southeast Asian monastic establishments of the later period also. The paper would shed light on the modern monastic discipline and the architectural spaces and their engaging role in restoring the Buddhist heritage and faith in the contemporary phase. By taking up select case studies of monastic establishments, a comparative study would be undertaken, in order to understand the transmission of ideas, practices and visual forms.

Key words: *cultural landmarks, all-inclusiveness, geographical diffusionism, cross-cultural interactions, cosmological symbolism*

Introduction

With the institutionalization of Vajrayana Buddhism in the Eastern India, the Buddhist tradition of establishing monastic institutions, also called Mahāvihāras, witnessed a roaring prosperity with the outburst of artistic activities under the aegis of two Buddhist dynasties- the Pala (750-1174 C.E.) and the Bhaumakara (736-940 C.E.). After the decline of the Gupta Empire, the Buddhist cultural and philosophical development which had waned due to a dark phase of interregnum, witnessed the outset of a glorious era of dynamic resurgence by the advent of the eight century CE. The Pala rulers gained stronghold over the regions of Bengal, Bihar and modern day Bangladesh and gradually extended their supremacy to the northern parts of India, while the Bhaumakara rule took over the control of the Odishan sphere, which collectively contributed to the efflorescence of Buddhist art and literature before its final dissolution in India during the eleventh century CE.

These two Eastern Indian dynasties not only appropriated the architectural precedents as prototypes which were constructed by the preceding dynasties, but also revitalized and reinvented the structural compositions and iconographic configurations of the pre-existing Mahāvihāras in accordance to the changing Buddhist ideologies and doctrinal values. Despite changing belief patterns and influx of new ideological elements, the Buddhist foundational concepts of soteriology, cosmology and enlightenment were truly restored, ideated and deified in these sacred and edifying structural forms. These monastic-cum-learning centres emerged as the protectorate of the faith and Buddhist scholasticism and also played an influential and authoritative role in the political and socio-economic dynamics of these Buddhist kingdoms.

Under the pervading influence of the monarchy, the Mahāvihāras attained the supreme rank of the state citadel such as their conceptual model and architectural framework underwent structural and cosmological expansion, which primarily differed from the early *saṅgharāma* or *vihāras*. They provided a strong foundation for the statecraft, legitimizing the monarch's governance in eye of his pupils, since donation of *vihāras* was regarded as the highest act of merit-making that upheld his sanctimonious rank. Besides, apart from the utilitarian aspect, these Mahāvihāras also upheld the spirit and unity of the Buddhist coenobitical community by emphasizing collective observance of ritualistic practices, ordinations, recital of monastic rules and distribution of alms etc. (Le Huu Phouc, 2010:47) They were consecrated as fortified centres of massive size with monumental gateways, bastions and protected walls, composed of multi-functional structural establishments that sheltered and nurtured thousands of learned scholars, monks and pilgrims, who venerated and practiced different schools of thoughts and disciplines during their stay. This type of radical and holistic approach fostered a religious atmosphere suitable for the surge of artistic output by cultivating regional school of arts in Eastern India marked with unique stylistic features that represented a coalescence of Gupta classical idiom and the indigenous impulses. Artistic schools were established that yielded sculptures representing Buddha and manifold manifestations of Buddhist male and female divinities, rendered in stone and metal of varying sizes, ranging from diminutive to hieratic types. The sculptures of this phase explicated the high standard of artistic excellence, creativity and the dominance of textual sources in the iconographic manifestations.

This indicates that a codified system of literary sources was developed, which included literary compendiums on iconography, rituals, practices, philosophy, logic, sciences and other branches of studies. Hence, such wide range of subjects professes the interdisciplinary curriculum followed in these monastic universities. A good number of literary sources of both Mahayana and Tantrayana disposition were written by Buddhist scholars and pilgrims residing in these monasteries, which were subsequently copied, translated in varied languages and widely distributed to different parts of the South and Southeast Asia and also the Far Eastern kingdoms. As a part of this scholastic dialogue, emissaries and Buddhist scholars from Eastern Indian kingdoms were sent to the Chinese courts with copies of manuscripts as royal gifts. Besides, to propagate and articulate comprehensive systems of Buddhist Esotericism in the Southeast Asian subcontinent, scholars from Bengal, Bihar and Odisha, such as Prajna, Vajrabodhi, Atisa, embarked on overland journeys and voyages to distant lands. There are archaeological and textual records in support of this religious transmission. On the other hand, incoming of Chinese pilgrims and monks for religious and academic pursuits which started in the early times with Faxian, Xuangzang and I-tsing continued to flourish, adding impetus to the scholastic development.

In view of the above discussion, archaeological, epigraphic and literary evidences expose significant cultural and material connections, long-trade contacts and patterns of Buddhist transmission between Eastern India and Southeast Asia. The Pala and Bhaumakara dynasties ruling over Eastern India majorly contributed in such interregional commercial, artistic and religious exchanges.

The primary concern of this paper is to present the development of the Eastern Indian Mahāvihāras, patronized by the Pala and Bhaumakara rulers and their cross-cultural linkages which they shared contemporaneous Buddhist buildings of Southeast Asia. The paper introduces the historical and socio-political significance of the Mahāvihāras during the early medieval period, which is followed by discussion on the artistic and architectural linkages and commonalities between the monastic buildings created within the distinctive political and geographical spheres. The next section focuses on the context of geographical diffusionism, which encouraged the mobility of pilgrims and scholars, leading to the formation of a pilgrimage network within the global perspective.

Catalysts for the Cross-Cultural Architectural and Artistic Interactions and Religious Expansion

With an aim to understand the architectural and artistic significance of the Eastern Indian monastic establishments and their impact on Southeast Asian religious buildings, it is important to summarize their characteristic features by taking up select case studies, since providing an extensive overview is beyond the scope of this paper. To begin with, it is important to note that unlike the rock-cut hewn cave monasteries of the Deccan, the Eastern India monasteries followed the traditional building style of the *viharas* that was popular in the north and north-western India. They were mainly build-up of burnt brick rather stone since it was the most doable material capable of withstanding heavy rainfall, along with a combination of other materials, like- stone, timber and stucco, which were used for decoration and building of roofs, pillars, substructures and image-making. The common features are- a main sanctuary, a courtyard for congregational worship, some subsidiary structures like votive stupas, a miniature replica of the main shrine, a long aisled hall and residential complex with an external lavatory complex and water reservoirs. These monasteries followed a well-planned ground plan and advanced architectural techniques, like-corbelling and hydraulic methods were used. Scholars have observed that the centrally

placed temple is of Sarvatobhadra¹ type surrounded by the quadrangle, consisting of projecting image chapels on the cardinal directions and is provided with long-approached. They follow two major styles- in plan it is cruciform and in elevation the type is pyramidal, comprising of at least three tiers, surrounded by ambulatory passages. (Ansua Sengupta, 1993: 71-72)

Another interesting feature is that all these monastic establishments comprise votive stupas of varied dimensions, which often contain hollow central shaft for reliquaries. The stupas were dressed with ornamental brick pedestals and are often decorated with images of Buddhist deities and also life scenes of Buddha. These stupas are not only reminiscent of the Buddhist funerary customs, but as noted by historians they are emblematic forms elucidating Sakyamuni Buddha's presence in the Mahavihara enclosure. Himanshu Prabha Ray pointed that 'the monasteries and other structures developed around the *stupa* and the immediate precincts of the *stupa* continued to be regarded as sacred'. (Himanshu Prabha Ray, 2013: 39)

The architectural planning and construction were based on the models of early sangharama based on the records in the ancient Buddhist scriptures, but Vajrayana Buddhism had a deep-seated influence on their architectural forms and ground plan. The conceptual model of Mahaviharas firstly came into existence with the foundation of Nalanda Mahavihara² under the Gupta dynasty which served as prototype for the Eastern Indian monasteries. However, a close architectural analysis reveals that the quadrangular plans with central cruciform temples invariably seen in the Eastern Indian monasteries shared close artistic and structural affinities with the Gandharan monasteries, ascribable to 2nd -4th century CE. Le Huu Phouc has opined that the similar multi-terraced cruciform temples perhaps originated during Gandharan period, such as the Dharmarajika and Bhamala, and later such architectural style was adopted in the Gupta period as seen in the main temple of Sarnath and the Kesariyastupa. (Le Huu Phouc, 2010: 74)

Another proposition explaining this type of architectural plan has been proposed by Adelheid Herrmann who has attempted to visualize the mandalas in the architectural elements of the Pala Mahaviharas as they comprise meticulously planned structures based on philosophical grounds, which display systematic iconographic configuration of Buddhist deities. She attempted to interpret the ground plan of these temple complexes as mandalas and integrate and juxtapose the two-dimensional visual representations of the mandalas on the three-dimensional architectural components. (Adelheid Herrmann-Pfand, 2010: 52-67) She pointed that the central temple building of the Pala Mahaviharas seems to fit the requirements of a mandala palace with the four cult chambers in the four cardinal directions and the main deity residing on top of the central shaft of the building in an elevated position. She has further surmised that the monk cells in the outer walls of Pala Mahaviharas are symbolic equivalent to the thousand Buddhas of the vajradhatu mandalas, which is always quadrangular in plan, more so as the monks cabins were least partly used as shrine rooms. In this relation, it is known from the Tibetan sources that BSam-yas, the first Tibetan monastery consecrated in CE 775, was modelled as a replica of the Odantapuri Mahavihara, which was the famous early Pala monastery. (Adelheid Herrmann-Pfand, 2010: 54)

Similar kind of architectural configuration has been observed in the Pala monasteries: Somapura monastery at Paharpur, Rajshahi district, Bangladesh (fig.1) and the Vikramasila Mahavihara at Antichak,

¹According to Indian architecture, the BrihatSamhita, the Sarvatobhadra type of temple should be square in plan with four entrances in the four cardinal directions and a chamber on each side (*chatuḥśalā*) (Ansua Sengupta, 1993: 58)

²Plenty of inscribed clay seals and archeological evidences found at the site that read "Sri-Nalanda-mahavihariyarya-bhikshusanghasya" (See: B.N. Misra, 1998: 167.)

Bihar (fig.2). However, the architectural configuration of the Nalanda Mahavihara is different as compared to the Pala monasteries, since it was built by the Gupta rulers and later underwent major structural and philosophical enlargement and refurbishing during the Pala period. Cunningham prepared the general layout of the complex, which appears like a parallelogram, following a linear layout on *viharas* and temples in two rows (fig.3). The Site 3 temple dedicated to Sariputra is considered to be the most important of the building at Nalanda and is of great artistic significance because of its outstanding architectural and sculptural configuration.

The Bhaumakara rulers erected Buddhist institutions of Ratnagiri, Lalitgiri and Udayagiri (fig.4), situated in the district of Cuttack, which today form the golden triangle of Buddhist monuments in Odisha. Excavations have uncovered different occupational levels and ruins of residential-cum-shrine complexes, central shrine housing images of Buddhas, votive stupas and beautifully carved gateways etc. Apsidal shrines are one of the distinctive features found in the Odishan Mahaviharas which were inspired from the Mahacaityas of Nagarjuna and Taxila. (Himanshu Prabha Ray, 2013: 43) Besides, the architectural configuration shows similarity with the Pala counterparts.

The architectural features developed in the Eastern Indian Mahaviharas, such as plan of cruciform stupas resting on multi-tiered terraces, which are pyramidal in form with radiating chapels, inspired the Buddhist monuments of Southeast Asia, like- Borobudur and Candi Sewu in Central Java, Bayon of Angkor Thom at Cambodia, Ananda temple and Shwezigonstupa of the Pagan kingdom, Myanmar. Today, all these heritage sites are highly venerated as pilgrim centers. Amongst them, Borobudur is one of the finest examples, which visualizes the concept of Mount Meru through the representation of *Vajradhatu Mandala* in a three dimensional structural form and the panel reliefs carved on the balustrades, representing the varied Buddhist themes further aids the devotee to attain the mental visualization of the supreme enlightenment (fig.5). (John Miksic, 1990: 50).

Mahaviharas as Pilgrimage Centres: Promoting Peace and Cultural Tourism

While setting out to outline and trace the cross-cultural religious and artistic interactions which existed between the Buddhist monastic centres of Eastern India and Southeast Asia, one of the most imperative questions arises that how these monastic centres did promote peace and reconciliation during the ancient times? Also, the scope of interpretations on this argument can be further expanded by examining the Buddhist cultural paradigm in the modern era, which has stimulated trans-regional mobility. Hence, with an aim to explore and understand the role of the Mahaviharas in peace building, this section proposes that these highly venerable learning-cum-artistic centres gradually became recognized as major pilgrim centers in addition to the eight holy places prescribed in the Mahaparinibana sutra. These are known as the *atthamaha-thanani*, corresponding to the four major and four minor life events of Buddha (*Ashta-Maha-Pratiharya*).

The Eastern Indian Mahaviharas promoted and expanded opportunities for worshipping and remembering the Buddha through religious, scholastic and artistic means. Two factors majorly contributed to this cosmopolitan milieu, establishing them as pilgrimage centres are- firstly, outgrowth of the building activity of the monastic centres at the nexus of major overland trade routes on *Uttarāpatha* that provided interregional locomotion and transportation connectivity and boosted religious mobility and cultural exchanges; and secondly, the close proximity of these hallowed spaces with the urban settlements appealed larger mass to adhere the Dharma, since the doctrinal reformations during this period vastly ministered all-inclusiveness of all societal classes in the Buddhist community. This whole idea fits to the

conceptual model of the pilgrimage, propounded by the Buddhist texts, like- the Dammapada, which quotes pilgrims as people who in search of Enlightenment and salvation wander the holy places throughout the world due to their inability to adopt the ascetic ideal of a monkhood.

The same tradition has continued in the modern times as well. These ancient Buddhist buildings of great artistic value and grandeur have stood the test of time, testifying the historical, pedagogic and cultural linkages which India shared with Southeast Asia in the ancient times. In the modern world, the ancient Buddhist Mahaviharas played a major role in resurgence of Buddhism on the global stage, promoting Buddhist diplomacy between India and other polities through the means of cultural trade and tourism. These heritage sites contain enormous potential to endorse Buddhist faith, art and practices as they upheld the spiritual antiquity of the Buddhist ideals and faith in its entirety. These UNESCO recognized heritage sites have been marked as pilgrim centers the Buddhist world map, frequently visited and venerated by millions of Buddhist followers and also tourists of different faiths. In the vicinity of these heritage sites, ASI has established museums and also educational institutions, like Nava Nalanda Mahavihara University modelled on their curriculum to promote the continuity of the cultural tradition.

Conclusion

To conclude, the construction of Mahaviharas led to the commencement of an efflorescent period of intellectual and philosophical development that drew a large mass and encouraged them to follow a spiritual path leading to the metaphysical plane that ultimately aimed at attainment of enlightenment. Through these discussions, it can be surmised that these educational institutions had an overriding influence on the wave of cultural and religious transmission, while promoting the idea of rebuilding peace and harmony through cultural and artistic means by building a symbiotic relationship among people belonging to different faiths, polities and societal and geographical spheres.

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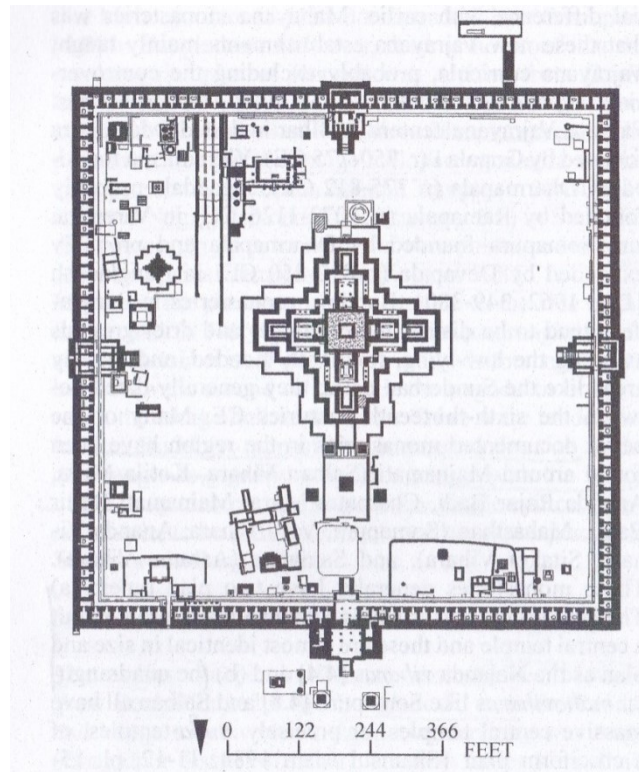


Fig.1- SompuraMahavihara, Bangladesh, ground plan



Fig.2- VikramsilaMahavihara, Antichak, Bihar, view of the central shrine

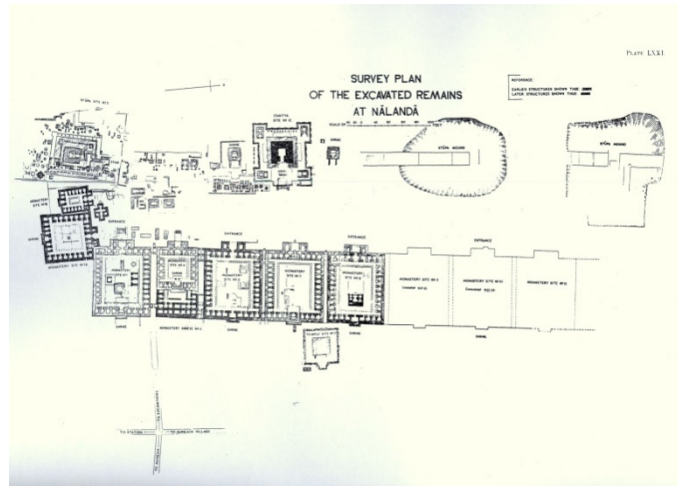


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Fig.5- Borobudur, Central Java, general view